

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vayera  
November 2023 / Cheshvan 5784

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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Vayera – Dust and ashes

In this week's Parasha we read about the destruction of the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah<sup>1</sup>. Before proceeding with the punishment, Hashem informs Avraham of his plans. The Midrash<sup>2</sup> explains that since the land that Hashem had granted to Avraham included these cities, it would be improper for Hashem to destroy the cities without Avraham's forewarning.

Avraham responds by arguing against the decree and trying to find sufficient merits for the cities to be saved. Avraham argues that if there are fifty righteous people to be found then the cities should be saved in their merit. Hashem agrees with this argument. But there are not fifty righteous people. Avraham then gradually reduces the number of righteous people that would need to be found in order to save the cities. He introduced his pleadings with the following statement:

*“Behold, now I have begun to speak to the Lord, although I am but dust and ashes”.*<sup>3</sup>

Rashi explains that by all rights, Avraham should have been killed and turned into dust in the battle of the four kings against the five kings<sup>4</sup> and he should have been turned into ashes when Nimrod threw him into the fiery furnace.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Avraham was exceedingly humble, and he recognised his lowliness in comparison to Hashem, therefore he referred to himself as “dust and ashes”. Nevertheless, he realised the importance of his role and he did not hesitate to bravely argue and plead before Hashem when he believed it was necessary.

Two weeks ago,<sup>6</sup> we learnt that as a reward for this statement of Avraham, his descendants merited two mitzvot – the ashes of the parah aduma (which effects tahara for someone who became impure) and the dust of the sotah waters (which helps to restore marital harmony if the wife was innocent).<sup>7</sup> Let's take a closer look at this.<sup>8</sup>

The sotah procedure was performed when a wife secluded herself with another man after being warned by her husband not to do so. Part of the procedure involved mixing some dust of the earth into water and then dissolving a parchment with the sotah pasukim into the water. This involved dissolving Hashem's name, which is ordinarily forbidden. After drinking the bitter sotah water, if the woman was guilty, she would die in a miraculous fashion. The Gemara<sup>9</sup> asks: “Why does the Torah command us to bring dust of the earth for a sotah? Because if she is innocent, a son like Avraham Avinu will come forth from her, who called himself ‘dust and ashes’”.

The parah aduma (red heifer) was used to purify people and utensils who had become impure, thus allowing them to participate in the services performed in the Bet Hamikdash, and to permit the people to once again eat certain holy foods, like korbanot, terumah and maaser sheni. The procedure involved burning the parah aduma and mixing its ashes with water. The water was then sprinkled on impure people and vessels as part of the purification process.

It is interesting that Avraham compared himself to dust and ashes. The dust of the earth has no past, but it has a future, in that plants can grow from it. Ashes have a past, they used to be a living, productive organism, but they

<sup>1</sup> A total of five cities were to be punished, Sodom and Gomorrah were the two main cities.

<sup>2</sup> Breishit Rabbah 49:2, brought by Rashi in his commentary to this pasuk.

<sup>3</sup> Breishit 18:27.

<sup>4</sup> As we read in last week's Parasha, Breishit Chapter 14.

<sup>5</sup> This refers to Nimrod throwing Avraham into a fiery furnace for refusing to worship avoda zara and Avraham's miraculous salvation as recounted in the Midrash (Breishit Rabbah 38:13).

<sup>6</sup> See Darchai Noam to Parashat Noach 5784.

<sup>7</sup> Sotah 17a.

<sup>8</sup> The following is based on an idea that I heard from Rabbi Shalom Rosner.

<sup>9</sup> Sotah 17a.

have no future. In other words, by comparing himself to dust and ashes, Avraham was saying that compared to Hashem he was totally nullified. It was as if he had no past – like dust, and no future – like ashes.

It is very telling that dust is specifically used for the sotah procedure, whereas ashes are used for the parah aduma procedure. The sotah had a problematic past. Given her past behaviour, her husband would never be able to fully trust her, and their relationship could have no future. The only way to salvage such a relationship, and convince the husband that his wife is innocent, is for Hashem Himself to testify, so to speak, through the miraculous sotah procedure. Just like the dust of the earth has no past, but it can have a fruitful future, so too, the sotah has a ruined past, but if proven innocent through the bitter waters trial, the couple can reclaim their past and are able to have a brighter future.

Similarly, it is appropriate that ashes are used for purifying one who had become impure. Such a person had a pure and holy past, able to participate in the Bet Hamikdash and to consume holy food. But then the person became tamei and thus is no longer able to participate in these matters of holiness. Just like the ashes, this person had a bright and productive past but no future. But through the parah aduma process, this person can become pure and reclaim his future.

Avraham begged Hashem to give the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah another chance. Ultimately Avraham was unsuccessful in his request<sup>10</sup>. Even though Hashem accepted Avraham's arguments, the cities did not have sufficient merits to avoid the decree of destruction.<sup>11</sup> However, perhaps Avraham was successful in a different way. He was davening for another chance for people that were facing a decree of destruction. And that is precisely what he received! In the merit of his arguments, and specifically his referring to himself as dust and ashes, Bnei Yisrael were granted these two mitzvot which specifically save those who were facing a decree of destruction. Someone who became impure would be forever barred from participating in matters of holiness and his ability to get close to Hashem would be seriously curtailed, if not for the gift of the parah aduma and the ability to become pure. And the wayward wife would be destined to have no future relationship with her husband, if not for the miraculous sotah waters which could clear her name (if she was in fact innocent) and allow the couple to once again have a future together. In Avraham's merit, these people were given a second chance.

These days, we do not have the parah aduma or the sotah procedure. But Hashem still gives us second chances through the gift of teshuva. Through genuine teshuva we can achieve atonement for our sins and avert a decree of punishment. We can have a brighter future, just like the impure person who becomes purified through the ashes of the parah aduma. And when one is motivated to do teshuvah out of love, Reish Lakish says that his wilful transgressions are accounted for him as merits.<sup>12</sup> Thus, through teshuva m'ahava – teshuva based on a yearning to come closer to Hashem – we can actually convert our sins into mitzvot! Just like the vindicated sotah, we can wipe our past clean.

The time to focus on teshuva is usually Elul and the first half of Tishrei, as we lead up to Rosh Hashana, the Ten Days of Repentance and Yom Kippur<sup>13</sup>. It seems odd to be focusing on teshuva now. But clearly, as a collective nation, our avodah in the Yamim Noraim was found lacking. Though the unity that is currently playing out among world Jewry is certainly a huge step in the right direction, we can also try to correct the underlying source for our troubles through teshuva. Each one of us has to work out what area he or she needs to work on and do a complete teshuva out of love. We have to ask ourselves tough questions: Do I have any resentment in my heart? Do I have even the slightest trace of jealousy? Do I look down at my fellow Jew at all? Do I keep hilchot Shabbat as well as I should? The horrific events of Simchat Torah were a manifestation of a great distance between us and Hashem. And we have to show Him that we have a strong desire to come close to Him again. Let us all do whatever we can, individually and collectively, to get closer to Hashem.

Let's try something this week:

1. We now have a second chance to do teshuva. Let's examine our deeds and see where we can improve.
2. At the same time, the amazing unity that we are witnessing must continue. We must keep up and strengthen our acts of unity and kindness.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>10</sup> See Darchai Noam Parashat Vayera 5780 and 5781, where we discussed this issue in more depth. As we discussed there, Lot and part of his family were saved in Avraham's merit so arguably Avraham did have some measure of success.

<sup>11</sup> The entire area was turned into salt, and even to this day the Dead Sea testifies to this historic event. On the one hand, this demonstrates the power of Hashem – when he brings destruction, the effects last forever. On the other hand, we see Hashem's kindness. The Dead Sea is the source of countless important minerals and medical treatments. Thus, within Hashem's punishment we also see a manifestation of His chesed.

<sup>12</sup> Gemara masechet Yoma 86b.

<sup>13</sup> Although in truth we should be doing teshuva regularly, every day.